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AUTHOR Anderson, Mary Lynn; Wrase, Judith
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ABSTRACT

The foreign student in an American university must be able to communicate in English, orally and in writing, well enough to do college-level academic work. The college or university which admits foreign students has the responsibility either to require a certain level of English proficiency or to provide the means for the student to get the special training in English which he needs to survive and succeed in school. The sentence and the paragraph are basic to teaching composition, to both foreign students and native speakers. Two sample compositions from international students enrolled in a freshman composition course reveal similarities and differences between the two groups and show some of the special needs of international students in these two basic areas. Grammatical and stylistic problems revealed in the two compositions are discussed in detail. (Author/CFM)

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What's REALLY Basic about Teaching Composition to Foreign Students?

by

Mary Lynn Anderson

and

Judith Wrase

A Paper Presented in a Workshop Session at the Conference on College Composition and Communication

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Workshop: What's REALLY Basic about Teaching Composition to Foreign Students?

The foreign student in an American university must be able to communicate in English--orally and in writing--well enough to do college-level academic work. This is true equally for the freshman and for the graduate student. (The need may be less pressing, admittedly, for the art, music, science, computer, or math student than for the literature, education, sociology or psychology major.) If a college or university admits foreign students, it has a responsibility either to require (and enforce) a certain level of English proficiency or to provide the means for the student to get the special training in English which he needs to survive--and succeed--in school. Most schools rely on the English, Communications, or Humanities divisions to teach English to foreign students if special classes are provided. Even if no special class is offered, the undergraduate student may still be required to complete the composition requirements for graduation just like other students; or he may be directed toward an English composition class by his major advisor, the foreign student advisor, or another professor. Whatever we may consider ideal, we must work with the reality: a classful of foreign students more or less eager to be taught to write in English, or one or two internationals in a composition class full of American students. What is really basic, anyway, about teaching them composition?

The foreign students in an English composition class have some needs that are different from and some needs that are the same as native speakers of English. For both, the sentence and the paragraph are basic. A look at two sample compositions from international students enrolled in a freshman composition course should help bring to light the similarities and differences between the two groups and show some of the special needs of international students in these two basic areas.

PAPER I

Merchant work long hard hours as much as 12 hours a day 7 day a week. He is probably the most overworked and underpaid person, usually his pay is much less than everybody else.

The small merchant does not have a paid vacation and free insurance of any kind. Sometimes he actually loses money by being on the job.

Whe a merchant closes his place of business at the end of a long day it does not mean he through. He still has to take care of his never ending dailly bookwork, counting, balancing, ordering, paying, bills etc.

Whe he does finally get to bed he may start worrying about another day.

He has a problem with thieves and shoplifters it happens at least once a year. Shoplifters is also a big problem as prices go higher it gets worse. One person can "rip off" half a days profit in 5 minutes.

The small merchant is blamed for higher prices. People said that they saw the same sugar on the shelf for only 59¢ last week in now is $2.49.

PAPER II

In any weekend it happen to me so many thigs that I do not know which one should I discribe. The interesting thing that I tried to do it, but I couldn't was my laundry done, So I took all my dirty cloths to the laundry There was so crouded I couldn't find any empty machine So I decieded to do it the other day.

The other day that was Saturday I forgot to do my laundry, because I was so busy to help my friend having a goodby party in Saturday night.

On Sunday I tried again to get my laundry done I checked the laundry it was so many People and all the machines were occupied and when I got back home from laundry I had a phone call that was invitation to Monett (a city in Missouri) for my friend's goodby party, Then I decieded not to do my laundry on weekend and still I havenot done my laundry yet, and I am going to it tomorrow.

Sentences Are Basic

In Paper I there are only four sentence errors, although much of the paper does not "sound" right; in fact, it does not read coherently at all. Lines 2-3 contain a comma splice (a comma connecting two complete sentences). On a positive side it can be said that the student at least felt that there was a break in thought there; he simply used the wrong punctuation. (Note that he uses commas in only one other structure in the rest of the paper--for nouns in a series in lines 9-10.) However, he neglects to feel a break in lines 13-15 when he writes two sets of fused sentences.

To teach the student to correct these three errors, I would have him mark the subjects and verbs in his sentences, particularly the sentences in lines 2-3 and 13-15. Then I would review with him the concepts of coordination and subordination and the use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. If these concepts were new to him, I'd have him practice by combining simple sentences with the conjunctions. He apparently senses the idea of subordination, for he uses the conjunction when in lines 7 and 11. After a review he should recognize the conjunction as in line 14. Then I would review the use of commas and periods with sentence structure: commas come before a coordinating conjunction connecting two independent or complete sentences and after an introductory subordinate clause but never between two independent sentences not connected by a coordinating conjunction (lines 2-3). A period is used instead.

The final sentence structure problem lies in the last sentence, particularly in the phrase "in now is $2.49." Sometimes a teacher needs to guess at meanings in order to suggest changes. I guess that he means "and now it is $2.49" simply because Spanish-speaking students, including

the writer of the essay, frequently omit the subject before the verb; another possible guess is "it now is $2.49." If I chose the first guess, I would review with the student the fact that English verbs always use subjects even when the verb is obviously shows a third person singular subject. If I selected the second guess, I would treat the resultant fused sentence as I did the ones in lines 13-15.

There are obviously other errors in this essay that need to be pointed out to the writer. The most serious grammatical problems are subject-verb agreement in lines 1 and 14 and omission of a verb in line 8. Any standard basic English as a Second Language grammar text contains explanations and drills for such problems.

The second essay about the difficulties of doing the laundry seems almost impossible on a first reading. Where to begin with this essay? Certainly the writer needs a lot of work in grammar and idiomatic expression, but what about his sentence structure? His basic problem with sentences is his difficulty in connecting them together. He has written lines 9-14 as one huge sentence that uses only a few of the normal English connectors--and, when, then. His favorite connector seems to be and, so I would start working with him there. I would have him break up lines 9-14 into a series of simple sentences without any connectors.

1. On Sunday I tried again to get my laundry done.
2. I checked the laundry.
3. It was so many People.
4. All the machines were occupied.
5. I got back home from laundry.
6. I had a phone call.
7. That was invitation to Monett for my friend's goodby party.
8. I decieded not to do my laundry on weekend.
9. Still I havenot done my laundry yet.
10. I am going to it tomorrow.

Then I'd review the concept of coordination with him, and have him practice using the coordinating conjunctions and, but, or, nor, for, so and yet. He is then ready to use coordinating conjunctions wherever he can between his separated sentences. Some possibilities include:

1. Combine 2, 3, 4 to read "I checked the laundry but It was so many People and all the machines were occupied."
2. Combine 7, 8 to read "That was invitation to Monett for my friend's goodby party so I decieded not to do my laundry on weekend."
3. Combine 9 and 10 to read "Still I havenot done my laundry yet but I am going to it tomorrow." The student may notice the use of yet at the end of sentence 9. Yet here means still and merely repeats the idea expressed in the first word of the sentence.

As he is rewriting his sentences, I would begin to suggest other small changes to make his sentences sound more "correct": "there were too many people," "was an invitation to Monett," "on the weekend," "I am going to do it tomorrow."

The next step would be to review the concept of subordination and the use of subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns. After he does some drills, he could begin to combine the sentences from his essay. Some possibilities he may see are:

1. "When I got back home from the laundry, I had a phone call." (a sentence he originally wrote in the essay)
2. "I had a phone call which was an invitation to Monett for my friend's goodbye party."

He could now rewrite his paragraph by using these sets of combined sentences. I would point out that not all sentences must be combined. A single simple sentence among combined ones adds variety.

Once he has reworked the last paragraph, which seems to be the most problematic one on a first reading of the essay, he is now ready to apply

those concepts to other sentences in the paper. In paragraph one he can recognize the inappropriateness of so in line 3 and its appropriateness in line 5. He should recognize the inappropriateness of that in line 6 and the appropriateness of because in line 7. He now has a method for checking his own sentences to avoid running all his ideas together and to show meaning relationships between them.

The essay contains many other problems that make it sound "funny." The writer certainly needs work on the use of the introductory it and there structures (lines 1, 4, 10). One way to teach him to use certain idioms and structures, after an explanation of any grammatical reasons for the structures, is to have the student, as part of his revision, write several sentences using the expressions correctly. In this paper the student might write sentences for "on Saturday night," "another day" as a correction for "the other day," "going to do it tomorrow," and "busy helping my friend have a goodbye party." The latter construction could wait until a study of infinitive and gerund phrases or until the student has mastered basic sentences. Sometimes it is best for the student not to correct everything at once. Probably the most useful and most important grammatical structures for him to learn immediately are the it and there structures, the use of on with days and dates, and the expression another day.

Paragraphing Is Basic

The most common organization problem for international students involves paragraphing. Many students don't know the logic of an English paragraph, or even that it has a logic. The idea of developing one main idea sufficiently with several sentences, particularly the movement from generalization to specific examples and detail, may not be a part of the student's native language. Furthermore, he may not have the vocabulary

or structural sophistication to elaborate on an idea or to keep from writing everything he wants to say in one sentence.

I suspect that some of these problems are reflected in Paper I. The student has some notion about relationships between sentences, since all but one of the "paragraphs" have at least two sentences. But none of them could be considered very well developed. Since he has used some details (lines 9, 15-16, 18-19), we assume that he knows how to support an idea but perhaps just didn't know what else to say.

To improve the paragraphing in this paper, I would follow three steps. First, I would help the student think of a sentence which would encompass the idea of the entire paper--a topic or thesis sentence. In this case the topic of the assignment (which the student omitted) would serve well: "Merchants have a hard life." Or "Merchants must work very hard to make a living."

When the student is satisfied with a sentence that covers all the main ideas in the paper, I would have him list the main ideas. The first emphasis, that merchants have long hours, includes the first four existing paragraphs. I would suggest that if all these paragraphs were combined into one, the student would have a unified, developed paragraph providing one support for the topic sentence. The last two paragraphs bring up two more different topics which also illustrate the hard life merchants have. I would suggest that more examples in each paragraph, and perhaps a justification for the high prices (if there is one) in the last paragraph, would make these paragraphs sufficiently developed. A concluding sentence, then, would complete the idea begun in the topic sentence. The student would have a paper with a main idea and paragraphs with main ideas and supporting details.

In the second paper, the student again obviously has an idea of separating paragraphs according to some order--in this case chronological.

His problem is more with sentences than with organization, although he could be encouraged to make the entire narrative into one paragraph with a unifying topic sentence, or to make two paragraphs instead of three. The danger of encouraging the student to supply more details in paragraph 2 is that he might write more about the party than about the laundry. Here, again, a topic sentence would clarify the purpose: Is the main idea to tell all the events of the weekend, or to tell about the problems of getting the laundry done? The choice would determine whether this paper should be one paragraph or several. It would also determine the kinds of details that should or should not be added.

Neither of these papers presents many surprises in the way of paragraphing problems to the composition teacher. Lack of supporting detail, lack of understanding about where a new paragraph should occur, lack of a unifying idea--all these are common problems with native English-speaking American students. The teacher working with foreign students can use many of his customary techniques to handle these problems.

A more difficult problem to deal with is the paragraph in which we can see no direction, no clear plan or organizing principle. It is possible in such cases that the student is organizing the paragraph according to the logic of his native language, a logic inherent in that language, but unintelligible to us. He may be using repetitions, parallel structures, or digressions in a way that makes us think he is off the subject or not concentrating on the main idea. Or he may be "circling" the subject, hinting at the main idea or presenting all the ramifications, without specifically naming the main topic. All of these may be rhetorical devices used to present arguments in various other cultures. In another language there may be no such thing as generalizations supported by specific details. The teacher, then, must be sensitive to the possibility that the student does not know that an English paragraph works differently from a Persian or Korean one.

In this case, the teacher might present a summary or scheme of various thought patterns of other languages so the student knows he is not doing something "wrong" by writing the way he is accustomed. An excellent presentation of these patterns is in Robert Kaplan's article, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education" (Language Learning, Vol. XVI, Nos. 1-2, pp. 1-20), also reprinted in the Teacher's Manual for Robert Bander's American English Rhetoric (Holt, Rinehart). The teacher could then show the traditional English patterns of development for longer papers--classification, process, examples, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, etc. (The individual paragraph pattern within these patterns of development is general to specific.)

The emphasis must be on writing in an organizational mode which the audience will understand, and NOT on any value judgments about which cultural thought pattern is better or clearer or more effective. The student quickly recognizes reality: if he is writing for an American professor, he must organize his paragraph in a way that will communicate with that professor. What to a foreign student is artistic, elegant, or skillfully presented may be to us digressive or repetitive. But what to us is straightforward and to the point may be to him offensively blunt or unadorned. The teacher's careful presentation can help make this adjustment to a new thought pattern smoother.

The composition teacher upon first reading Paper I or Paper II might throw up his hands in horror and declare that working with either the papers or the students is impossible. But if that teacher knows that an international student has the same basic problems as a native speaker of English, he at least has a familiar starting place. For what is basic to any student of English composition, foreign or native, is the same: the sentence and the paragraph.